

## BUDDHISM IN MODERN LIFE

By Dr. Ananda Guruge



he topic as it stands has several parts to it: What is modern life? What is Buddhism? And what role has Buddhism to play in modern life?

Modern life in itself is very difficult to define. One might say that modern life is characterized by the fact that the world is getting smaller; that people are having greater access to each other; that communication barriers are fast disappearing; that it is possible for one to know what happens everywhere in the world within a short time, and thereby permits participation in the life of a larger cross-section of the world than one could have ever imagined. That would be one aspect of modern life. Related to that would be modern life understood in terms of science and technology. Man in his attempt to conquer nature, disease, natural barriers, has performed certain feats of a technological complexity which are quite mind

boggling. That is another aspect of modern life. A third, perhaps a more disturbing aspect of modern life, is that with the world getting closer, communication barriers breaking away, and scientific and technological advance becoming so rapid, we have come face to face with several problems in terms of economic and political rivalry, pollution, population explosion, scarcity of resources and the indiscriminate use of resources that might not be replaced. With these come a host of other issues which can be plainly labelled as “survival”.

### **Can Modern Civilization Survive?**

To this one may add also a moral dimension - an ethical question - and ask: “To what extent, in the process of modernization and conquering nature, have we deviated from the ability to conquer ourselves? Has the struggle for survival meant that the modern man has become a slave to selfishness, bound by his own desires and his whims? Have we lost all the things of very special value to human beings such as inter-personal relations, the anxiety to look after the well-being of others, the spirit of being of selfless service to others? Have we lost these?”

So when one thinks of modern life one can think in terms of a great degree of optimism and, at the same time, an equal degree of pessimism. One can be so pleased that we live today at a time when there seems to be nothing that man cannot conquer. Maybe, there are still some diseases that challenge him. Maybe, there are still certain places in the universe where man would like to

be, and still he has not developed his technology to be there. But it appears as if all these are within reach of man. With this optimism about man's capacity, comes the pessimistic aspect that we have, in the process, lost something. Let us keep both of these in mind.

## **Buddhism**

Then let us look at what Buddhism is. What do we understand by Buddhism? It can mean many things to many people. To someone it can be only life of the Buddha; the example that the Buddha and his immediate disciples set – that glorious feat of a man, who stood before men as a man and declared a path of deliverance. This is one kind of Buddhism. To another, Buddhism would mean the massive doctrine as recorded in the Buddhist literature, which indeed is voluminous and contains several thousand pages recording the words of the Buddha. And in it is described a very lofty, abstruse, complex and learned philosophy of life. Then based on whatever the Buddha taught, whatever the practices current at the time of the Buddha, there has grown a very rich culture, a culture which has extended to all parts of Asia for over 2500 years, and to which people from various walks of life with various backgrounds from all these countries have made a lasting contribution. A large number of sects or schools or philosophical systems have evolved and all of them, quite rightly, go under the name of Buddhism. Then comes another definition of Buddhism and that is the kind of ritual that has grown

around the doctrine of the Buddha as a result of his teachings and the way of life preached by him, becoming a religion. Whether the Buddha intended it or not, his teachings became a religion, a religion to which people were prepared to hold allegiance and which has its own ritual, organization, and ways or criteria for deciding what is properly done or what is improperly done. Now that is another kind of Buddhism. If one were to take each of these aspects separately, and try to examine the impact of what he would call Buddhism on modern life, it would certainly be an enormous task.

To me Buddhism is all these. It is the Buddha and his life, the doctrine, the culture that evolves around it, and the ritual that is connected with it. Once we take this to be one large body of human experiences, distilled in the finest form and presented to us in such a manner that each one of us could select that part which appeals to us, we begin to see the remarkable uniqueness of Buddhism. During the days of the Buddha himself he used to emphasize this point. One need not be a scholar and learn everything. Buddhism is not like studying a subject like mathematics where you have to learn all your theorems and different methods of working out the various types of problems. If you know the fundamentals, the basis, a scholarly detailed study is not an important precursor to practice. So out of this vast Buddhist culture, religion, or literature, or the vast body of experiences that come to us as Buddhism, each one of us would find that which is relevant to our life, to our type

of problems.

### **A Timeless Doctrine**

I have often wondered how Buddhism came to be called “*Akalika*” which means “timeless” – that it exists for all time. The more I see the changes that have taken place in Buddhist culture or religion, the more I see how it keeps on adjusting to the needs of different eras, populations, individuals, the more I see that it has been possible for the Buddha to evolve a message that would remain eternally fresh. So if Buddhism has an application today and if Buddhism has a place in modern life, it is because of that timeless relevance, emanating from a set of eternal values. To talk of a characteristic of being eternal is a very paradoxical way of presenting or describing a religion which has the principle doctrine of impermanence at the bottom of it. The characteristic of timelessness comes from the fact that it had understood that everything continues, but continues in a flux, in a process of continuing change and evolution. Thus Buddhism was able to adjust to different times and civilizations. We can therefore without any hesitation approach any aspect of Buddhism as something relevant and applicable to us today.

What are these elements that make Buddhism timeless? Let me take just a few of them. First of these would be the recognition of the responsibility of the individual. The Buddha is one of the most remarkable religious teachers who emancipated man from all bonds

– bonds of supernatural ties, a Godhead, a creation, sin or any other characteristic inherited from anyone else (other than what you yourself have done). So when the Buddha says that each person is his own master, he promulgates a principle whose applicability becomes stronger as man begins to get more and more confidence in the control of himself and the environment. So if, today, with scientific and technological development, man feels that he has come to a point where his own intellect makes him superior to anybody else or allows him able to solve any problem that he has, whether physical or ethical or political or whatever, would not the principle that man is the master of himself - that he has to be responsible to himself because whatever he does he inherits – become one of the most important ways of looking at himself?

So this fundamental approach to making man free from all bondages, spiritual and otherwise, is one of those very important doctrines of Buddhism that have contributed to its timelessness. As we advance, as greater progress is made by man, there will be the greater need for him to assert that he is the master of himself. The more he asserts himself to be the master of himself, the more is he reiterating the Buddha's own statement: "*Atta hi attano natho*".

### **Freedom of Thought**

Then comes another equally important doctrine. The doctrine of open-mindedness – the liberty of thinking. Buddhism not only frees us from a Godhead or super-



natural tie but also liberates mankind from dogma. Let us visualize the time when the Buddha was preaching. It was a time when various religious teachings were in a ferment and India of the 6th century B. C. was one of the most interesting places to be. Religious teachers propounding various types of doctrines were vying with each other to have more and more converts. Besides these new teachings, there were religious systems that were deep rooted. In all these religious systems, the theory was: "We have found a way". "This is the correct path". "You come, you will be saved." Into their midst comes the Buddha who says: "Do not believe what your book says. Do not believe what your teachers would say. Do not believe what your tradition says. Do not take anything merely because it comes to you with the authority of somebody else. Make it a personal experience. Think for yourself. Be convinced. And once you are convinced act accordingly." Now this was a very refreshing manner in which man was given one of the greatest freedoms that he is fighting for, the freedom to think for himself. If under feudalism, before the present advances were made, we were not able to assert so much of our right to think for ourselves, as these advances take place we will be asserting that right more and more. We will be wanting to feel that we are convinced, after our own investigations, after we have been able to go through the principles, the facts, the pros and cons. This we consider an inviolable right. This is the second doctrine, whose applicability to modern times, and future times,

would continue.

### **Role of Buddhism**

Then comes the most important question – apart from supporting what man will want to assert for himself today and in the future, has Buddhism a corrective role to play? With this question comes the most important aspect to which all of us should pay a fair amount of attention today. While man is making all these advances, we also find that the pressure of modern life – the rivalry for survival, the rivalry for doing better than the other, the desire to live a life of competition economically, politically, culturally, or in whatever form – has brought tensions. In order to relieve these tensions man has evolved more and more recreations and relaxations. They apparently result in slight relaxation of the tensions but seem to take people more and more into a vicious circle. Because of the tensions one engages oneself in a variety of escapist activities, and because these escapist activities take too much time, one has to catch up with the process of survival, only to oneself in a worse period of tremendous tension. The greater the economic progress, the greater the political enlightenment, the more the people need sedatives and tranquilizers to keep themselves doing their normal duties. You have to take one pill to keep awake, one pill to sleep, one pill to relax and so on. This kind of modernization that has come in, wherein man's tensions have mounted to a point where he finds that all that he has gained is of no use, is a very



serious situation. In addition to these tensions comes another facet wherein, with the greater amount of leisure that man gets today as a result of freedom from work drudgery, he has another problem to cope with – that is, boredom. So with tension on one side, boredom on the other, comes a variety of other complications which make many people really unhappy. Today one may ask the question: Are we in a situation where people are really happy or are we in a situation where people at last have realized that in spite of all that they could gain, they have lost something in the form of some fundamental aspects of life? Who is to be blamed? Are we to blame science? Are we to blame technology? Are we to blame the political systems? Are we to blame the economic system that we have inherited or we have developed? Or are we to blame ourselves?

### **You are your own Master**

Going back to the Buddha's own way of looking at the problem you will say, you hold the reins of life in your hands. Because whatever has gone wrong you are responsible, you are your own master. You have let it go – allowed it away out of your hands. It is easy to blame a person, saying "You have let an opportunity pass. It has slipped away from your hands!" But does that help? The greatness of Buddhism lies in the fact that it does not stop after placing the responsibility on you, it does not say "Now that is it. We have now found the culprit." It proceeds to the next stage of saying: "Here are a few

things that could be done.”

If one were to go around looking at the various types of religious, psychiatric, psychological measures that have been evolved in order to save man or to cure man from tension on one side and boredom on the other side, you would find that there are many but not one as inexpensive and as practical as some of the very simple directions that Buddhism offers. One would ask the question – does this mean that once you become a Buddhist you would be freed from the tension and boredom of modern life? To answer that question is very difficult because no one becomes a Buddhist. There is no one who is to be labelled as a Buddhist. Because Buddhism is not one of those philosophies or ways of life or religions – I use the word religion because there is no other classification to which it can be put squarely – wherein there is a need to have a label. During the days of the Buddha, people went to him, listened to him and if they were pleased with him they would say, “I take refuge in you, I take refuge in your teachings, I take refuge in the Sangha, the community, the disciples who are following this way of life.” Even today that is all that is needed for anybody to call himself a Buddhist. Having been convinced that what the Buddha has taught has some relevance to one’s life problems, one feels that it is a way of life that could be followed with profit, by taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. With this inner conviction he becomes a Buddhist with absolutely no ceremony, no ritual of any kind, no regis-

tration, no other legal requirements. It is what F.L. Woodward, one of the finest translators of the words of Buddha, calls “a do-it-yourself religion”.

What is very significant today is that there may be thousands of people who have never gone into a Buddhist temple, never got into the ritualistic set-up which has evolved in the Buddhist countries, but who in their own heart have seen the validity of the message of the Buddha and who are leading a life according to the tenets of Buddhism. In fact, we are finding that a vast majority of the world’s population hold allegiance to the Buddha for one reason or another. This is one of the most remarkable things that one would regard as almost a miracle.

### **A Way of Life**

The way of life the Buddha preached was very simple. To the layman it consisted of just five simple precepts: do not kill, do not steal, do not engage in sexual pleasures through wrong means, do not lie, do not take intoxicants – a very simple set of precepts indeed. But the Buddhist way of life, the way the Buddha described ‘does not end with this kind of precepts. Simplified in a manner that anyone could understand, there are three things that each person is expected to do, namely (using the Pali words because most of you are familiar with them) *Dana*, *Sila* and *Bhavana*.

*Dana* would mean liberality, generosity – the act of giving. It is very important that Buddhism begins with

*Dana* as the first virtuous act which one should engage in, in order to put himself on the correct path, because giving is an act of sacrifice. To be able to give something is to prepare your mind fully to give up something that you have, something you treasure, something to which you are attached. Thereby you counter one of the biggest causes of all the problems which, again in Pali, is called *Lobha* or desire or greed. It is very interesting to see how the way of life is presented to us in a manner that in following it step by step we get rid of some of the human weaknesses and characteristics that cause tension, and the boredom that is bothering most of us today. Liberality is to counteract desires, the greediness, the clinging nature.

Then *Sila* is adherence to certain precepts, or ethical or moral conduct. Buddha was fully aware of the fact that one could not set rules and regulations for everybody in the same manner. So there are a few rules for the lay people. There are a few more for those who want to enter into a committed religious life, and still more for monks, who have committed themselves to adhere to a very strict path of discipline and purification. So the *Sila* is a graduated thing, so that each person picks up that which he is able to follow for the present.

In *Sila*, or moral conduct or the ethical teachings of the Buddha, we come back to this original doctrine: they are not commandments, they are not prescribed from above, they are not prescribed by the Buddha as commandments to obey. Each one of the precepts, which

we, as Buddhists, take, is a promise unto ourselves of our own freewill. And the way they are worded is "I take upon myself the discipline of not killing", "I take upon myself the discipline of not stealing" and so on, because I am the master of my own destiny and it is I who should decide which kind of life I should lead. The Buddha as a guide had shown certain fundamental weaknesses, or faults, that one should try to avoid. The second cause of most of the problems we have is our animosity, or hatred to others. In Pali we say *Dosa*. *Sila* is one of those antidotes for this second cause of all our weaknesses. When we follow *Sila* we control, or rather we completely eliminate, the cause of hatred. The Buddha was one of those who were very conscious of the many effects of hatred. He had seen people ruining themselves as a result of hatred. That is what made it possible for him to state very categorically that hatred never ceases by hatred, that the more you hate, the worse it becomes. You hate me, I hate you: I hate you more, you hate me more and the hatred keeps on increasing to a point where both you and I burn ourselves in our mutual hatred, and to the Buddha the only way to solve it is that one party must stop. Because without one party, or better still both parties, trying to conquer hatred with friendship, hatred with non-hatred, this sequence of hatred would never cease. One way of dealing with it is based on the entire doctrine of the virtuous life of Buddhism. Because a virtuous life is attacking the second cause of our weaknesses, namely hatred, we have in Buddhism a most interesting, and



again a timeless doctrine, of loving kindness. Loving kindness, which is the cornerstone of Buddhism, (the foundation on which the Buddhist doctrine is built) has not been taken by the Buddha as merely a simple ethical principle. He had analysed the principle of loving kindness into sublime life.

Then comes *Karuna* – compassion. Compassion is more easily generated. You see somebody in trouble, you see somebody who needs your help, your heart moves towards that person and you rush to help him. That quality of rushing to somebody's help – feeling sorry for the other who is suffering, that is another aspect of loving kindness.

Then comes a third aspect of it which is more difficult to practise, and that requires tremendous love and pains, that is called *Mudita* that is, to share in others' happiness – to wipe out from your mind all traces of jealousy and envy, so that you enjoy the well-being of the other person, your neighbour, even your enemy.

Last of all comes the fourth aspect of loving kindness and that is total equanimity, *Upekkha*. You have no friends, no enemies, no one higher, no one lower. You have absolutely no distinctions between one person and another, and you are totally merged in a kind of unity with all beings, all things, all situations. So once you are able to live a life in which all these four characteristics govern your actions, there is no place for hatred, there is no place for rivalry, there is no place for competition. So this second principle of Sila looks after this set of



troubles that we would have.

Last of all comes the most significant, and the one to which you will be preparing to proceed immediately after this, that is *Bhavana* – meditation. *Bhavana* means the training of the mind. The word itself etymologically means development – a further development of the mind. The Buddha believed, and he is one of the earliest to state it in that manner, that everything emanates from the man's mind. The organization that I represent has as the preamble to its Constitution "As wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." And that reflects the first line of the first verse of the *Dhammapada*. A pure mind, a trained mind, a well-developed mind, a mind that can be controlled at will, a mind that does not go on to subjects that are conducive to tension and boredom, but keeps alert, keeps on developing itself, discovering itself and within itself the secret of life, the problems of life and the reality of life, is man's greatest treasure.

I am not surprised today that there is almost a craze, in the highly technologically developed part of the world, for all types of meditation. It makes no difference who preaches what, or what philosophy or technique is adopted. But the fact remains that the people are beginning to realize that a moment of quiet contemplation, a moment of deep penetrative thinking, a moment of well-directed properly controlled functioning of the mind, is an essential thing for the well-being of Man.

Two thousand five hundred years ago the Buddha

taught exactly the same way. And if there is nothing else that the man of today needs, he needs peace of mind. He wants to get away from his tensions and battle against boredom. And I see the answer in Buddhism, particularly in the three-fold path of *Dana*, *Sila*, *Bhavana*.

Look at the Buddha's own principle as the basis or beginning of his religious life. We hear of so many people who go from rags to riches but here was the case of a man who went from riches to rags, in search of, we may say, peace of mind – that greatest of blessings. As a result, he saw for himself, then taught to others, that the great handicap, the source of all trouble, is attachment.

So, if somebody were to come today and say: "I can take you straight to *Nibbana* this very minute," I think most of us will have lots of excuses to give. Someone will say, "Can't I wait till my daughter gets married?" Another might say, "Can't I wait till this World Fellowship of Buddhists General Conference is over?" "Can't I wait till I have finished my assignment in Bangkok?" We have our own preferred times when it comes to the ultimate goal.

Whatever be our decision as to reaching this goal, there is a point at which we have no escape. We cannot deny the fact that all modern developments have nothing to offer but insecurity and competitiveness as well as tensions and boredom associated with them. Buddhism offers a few very simple and very efficacious methods to combat that. And with this I feel that Buddhism has a role to play in our life and a role in which we, from the Buddhist countries, have an important part to play. It is

our responsibility to share our thinking, our knowledge, and our experience, with as many as possible, so that ultimately we all see that the message of the Buddha, which is meant for the good of mankind, continues to reach mankind in every nook and corner of the world.

